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The Nordic vision: Broadcasting Nordicness in the televised Nordic Council prize ceremonies

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Abstract

Since 2013, the Nordic Council prizes have been awarded at live broadcast ceremonies in the Nordic countries. The Nordic Council Prize in Literature is the most prestigious, but like the other prizes, it is also part of a regional political project by the Nordic Council based on a culture of prize-giving. Rather than focusing on book content or the literary award alone, this article investigates the prize-giving ceremony. It examines how the idea of the Nordic is expressed in the prize-giving culture of broadcasted ceremonies from 2013 to 2023. It explores how organizers use narratives, audio, text, and visuals in the ceremonies to convey the prizes' meaning through an arrangement merging culture, politics, and media. The article shows the prizes are tied to the broader regional political project—the promotion of a Nordic "imagined community." The ceremony must navigate the paradox of being both a competition between Nordic countries and an expression of Nordic cooperation. National characteristics are downplayed by avoiding national symbols, shifting focus to Nordic identity. This article contributes to the study of (literary) prize culture by showing how such prizes can be vehicles for a broader political project.

KEYWORDS
geopolitical culture, literary award, Nordic Council's prizes, Nordicness, prize culture, prize gala

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Nordic Council's prizes are awarded by the Nordic Council, an inter-parliamentary cooperation organization. Among the Nordic Council's prizes, the Nordic Council Prize in Literature is the most prestigious, and the award is influential across the national literary fields in the Nordic countries. Established in 1962, the literary award was followed by the creation of several other prizes: the Music Prize (1965), the Environment Prize (1995), the Film Prize (2002), and the Children and Young People's Literature Prize (2013).

While there have been award ceremonies since 1962 in conjunction with the Nordic Council's annual session, where politicians from the Nordic region meet, a significant shift happened in 2013. Previously, the ceremony had been closed to a select audience of Nordic politicians, journalists, and nominees, with public coverage limited to transcriptions in the organization's annual publication. However, in 2013, the award show began to be broadcast by Nordic public service broadcasters. Newspaper reports in the Nordic countries described this shift as a move toward making the event similar to the Oscars, in stark contrast to the early days when the prizes and ceremonies were positioned as an antidote to Americanization (Hiller, 2019, p. 15).

While the ceremony became broadcasted, the fundamental structure of the award process remained unchanged. The different prizes are awarded based on national nomination processes and the decisions of five different adjudication committees that decide upon a winner, which include representatives from the Nordic countries and autonomous regions that have submitted nominations. The countries involved are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, along with the regions of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland. Representatives from the Sámi language area can also nominate books for the literature prizes. Beyond the recognition of being awarded a prize, there is a relatively large cash prize of DKK 300,000 (approximately €40,200 in 2024), which is particularly significant in the context of cultural awards.

Rather than focusing on the content of books and the literary award in isolation, as in previous research (Hiller, 2019; Hjelmervik, 1998; Mai, 2015), this article investigates the prize-giving ceremony itself. The article examines, from a semiotic perspective, how the idea of "the Nordic" is expressed as part of a prize-giving culture in the broadcasted ceremonies from 2013 to 2023. More specifically, it explores how organizers use narratives, audio, textual elements, and visuals in the award ceremonies related to "the Nordic" to convey the meaning of the prizes. As all five prizes are awarded during the same ceremony, they cannot be understood separately but must be viewed as part of a broader prize-giving culture, where the political framing in the award ceremony plays a crucial role.

In this broader prize-giving culture, award ceremonies produce both winners and "also-rans" (those nominated but not winning), with the winners' reputations being especially elevated (English, 2005). The award winners and their works are distinguished from the rest, becoming singular and unique, thus worthy of special attention (Karpik, 2010; Reckwitz, 2020). While the meaning and significance of the awards may vary across different types of awards, over time and within the region, the broadcasted ceremony places entertainment and visual culture at the forefront, suggesting a potential union between entertainment and high culture.

However, the ceremony is not solely about entertainment or the creation of distinction and the celebration of prominent achievements; it is also an orchestrated event that merges culture, politics, and media. As a political organization is organizing a media event to highlight and communicate Nordic cultural production (and environmental issues), it seeks to gain political influence in the Nordic region and internationally through culture. Another prominent example of this is the European Union and the European Union Prize for Literature. This political strategy of using culture to achieve political ends is known as soft power (Nye, 2004), and prizes are one way for political organizations to gain such influence (Codina Solà & McMartin, 2022; Foret & Calligaro, 2019; Foret & Vargovčíková, 2021).

In this article, we argue that the prizes are linked to the broader regional political project—the political promotion of a Nordic "imagined community." This promotion includes ideas of "Nordicness," or the shared qualities and characteristics of being Nordic. The original concept of "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) was used to describe the rise of nationalism through print capitalism and publications in vernacular languages,

where people could imagine themselves as part of a broader community, even if they would never meet most of its members. In the case of the Nordic Council prizes, broadcasts are used to create a commonality for a regional "imagined community" of the Nordics. This commonality is fostered through the use of shared symbols, culture, and languages. While the impact of the ceremony and regional political project on the Nordic countries could be questioned based on the low viewer count, it is not the focus here. The focus is on how the organizers attempt to foster a regional "imagined community" that must contend with the national "imagined communities" of the Nordic countries.

This effort to promote the Nordic region is part of a complex geographical imaginary embedded in world politics, which can be understood as a form of "geopolitical culture" (Toal, 2017). Geopolitical culture pertains to the "identity of a territorial entity and the locational narrative it presents to itself and the world." (Toal, 2017, 39). This identity is shaped through boundaries of difference, positioning the Nordic region in relation to others, defining itself by both what it includes and what it excludes. The semiotic elements of the prize ceremonies play a key role in conveying this narrative, balancing the tension between nationalism and regionalism, and ultimately placing the Nordics on the map.

2 | PREVIOUS LITERATURE ON AWARDS SHOWS AND CULTURAL PRIZES

There has been a significant proliferation of awards in the fields of culture, especially since the 1970s, driven by a desire to create symbolic distinctions and establish relative prestige through the credentials conferred by such awards (English, 2005). This proliferation has been joined by celebrity culture and prizes as entertainment (English, 2005; Määttä, 2010). The role of prizes is of particular interest to study because they are singular events that are intentionally used and have unintended consequences in terms of translating between politics, economics, media, and culture. As English (2005, p. 10) writes, "[prizes] are the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital." In the promotion of prizes, there is a struggle for attention and influence in an attention economy, where scandals play a central role (English, 2005). Part of attempting to gain visibility and attention is the proliferation of award ceremonies, which have increasingly become televised (English, 2005).

The televised Nordic Council Prize gala is one example among many televised prize ceremonies. When such award shows involve cultural awards, they are not only sites of cultural criticism (Haastrup, 2021) but also sites of identity production and contestation (Coupe & Chaban, 2020; Grous, 2021) and opportunities for branding not only artists but also nations (Jordan, 2014). Here, we situate the Nordic Council Prize gala in the context of award shows by discussing, based on previous research, its relation to the tension between national and international levels of competition. This will be illustrated through the example of the Nobel Prize in Literature, which has played a pivotal role in shaping prize culture and the proliferation of awards (English, 2005). Furthermore, we will examine the functioning of televised award shows, drawing insights from the Oscars, widely regarded as the archetype for the televised entertainment of award ceremonies (English, 2005). Finally, we will explore identity construction and nation-branding through cultural competitions, utilizing Eurovision as a key example, as Eurovision is perhaps the clearest example of an attempt to balance entertainment and culture, as well as regional integration with national competition through an award show.

2.1 | The national and international of culture prizes: The Nobel Prize in Literature and the Nordic Council's prizes on the global stage

There is a particular tension to nation-branding in international competitions and awards that are awarded on an international stage. There are many examples of explicit competition between nations, such as the Olympic

Games, which are also intended to foster internationalism. The Nobel Prize in Literature is a pivotal example of such "Olympic internationalism," where the prize had a similar function as the Olympics in internationalizing literature (Sneis & Spoerhase, 2023). Similar to the Olympics, media comparisons of the relative success and standing of countries through tables became common practice for the Nobel Prize in Literature, creating not only competition among writers but also between countries (Sneis & Spoerhase, 2023). As Sneis and Spoerhase (2023, p. 157) write, "Insofar as literature … was considered an expression of culture, it became plausible that authors should be regarded as representatives of their national cultures". This is thus an example of how literary prizes can create tension between the national and the international level when an international prize in culture becomes interpreted through a lens of national competition.

Although similar in the sense of being a prestigious prize awarded once a year on an international stage, there are also important differences between the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Nordic Council prizes. Two crucial differences to the Nobel Prize in Literature, with its need to handle contradictory aesthetic judgments nested in scales within a global field (Habinek, 2023), are the organization of the Nordic Council prizes being a political organization and its more limited geopolitical scope, which is focused on the Nordic region. The Nordic authors and others awarded are seen as representatives, not of global culture but of *Nordic* culture, indicating the existence of a regional level of fields or scales for cultural production, distribution, and consumption beyond the nation-state (cf. Buchholz, 2022; English, 2005, p. 304; Levitt, 2020). As we will show, tensions between the nations and Nordic cooperation are built into the award and the ceremony. The aim of the prize is to bring the Nordic countries together, while the procedure entails national-level nominations and the logic of competition. If one country were to be disproportionately favored among the winners, it might defeat the purpose of the prize.

2.2 | Televised awards shows: Oscars and the Nordic Council's Prizes award shows

While the Nobel Prize has served as a precursor to many cultural awards in the so-called "legitimate" fields of art, the Oscars have wielded significant influence in the entertainment sector of culture (English, 2005, p. 69). It is no coincidence that the televised award show for the Nordic Council's Prize was mentioned in relation to the Oscars when it started, as "imitation and differentiation" (English, 2005) are important when other prominent awards are used to create a space for the award.

Many of the early film festivals were created in response to some other awards. For example, film festivals predating the Oscars were established through political motives, such as the Mussolini Cup starting in 1932, which today is called the Venice Film Festival (English, 2005, p. 71). The Cannes Film Festival was started as a response by being a non-fascist alternative festival (English, 2005, p. 71). The practice of using culture to promote politics once again highlights the close connection between international and national competitions, culture, and politics.

Since the 1970s, the live broadcast of award ceremonies such as the Oscars, Emmys, Grammys, and BAFTAs has included the presence of celebrities, contributing to the proliferation and increased visibility of these prizes (English, 2005, p. 33). This kind of event can be seen as "performing eventfulness," that is, communicating the "glamour and majesty" of an award ceremony and at the same time dealing with the specific characteristics of live television, such as the "unpredictability of unprepared film stars," the way in which prize presenters present the nominees, open the envelope revealing the winner, and the specific ways to film winners walking up on stage (Pavlounis, 2018, pp. 379–380). The events are also not only about the prestige and recognition of the awards, but the media and valorization themselves become events (Muniesa & Helgesson, 2013; Reckwitz, 2020, p. 122). These ceremonies are embedded in media culture, with music shows such as Eurovision or Idol with both a popular vote and jury votes, where failures are a large part of the narrative (Meizel, 2009).

Similar to the Oscars, the award ceremony for the Nordic Council Prizes was established long before the decision to broadcast them live was made, ever since the first prize in literature was established in 1962. However,

it was not until the expansion of the number of prizes with the prizes in film and environmental achievements, making the total of four prizes (later five with the children and young people's literature prize), that the ceremony started to show similarities to the well-known format of awards shows, with short nomination speeches, short acceptance speeches, and entertainment interludes. Up until the 1990s, the prize ceremony was more of an intellectual and cultural event with strong ties to cultural criticism, with long speeches from the prize committee and equally long speeches by the prize winner in literature (and to some extent in music) (for an exhaustive analysis of the Nordic Prize ceremonies 1962–2012, see Authors, forthcoming).

In the early Oscars galas, the event's "dramatic arc" aimed to climax with the major awards for best picture (Pavlounis, 2018, p. 384). This format has been adopted by the Nordic Council ceremony, where the literature prize is always awarded last, serving as the pinnacle of the event. The audience is consistently reminded that this prize is the oldest, and implicitly the most prestigious, of the Nordic Council prizes. Similar to the inaugural live broadcast of the Oscars, the initial televised Nordic Council prize ceremony also featured all prize presenters as previous winners/nominees of the prize, emphasizing "the historical stakes of the evening" (Pavlounis, 2018, pp. 384–385). This practice of recruiting past winners to announce new winners also involves them in the ongoing project of shaping the overarching "Nordic project."

2.3 | Identity construction and nation-branding in cultural competitions: Eurovision and the Nordic Council's Prizes

Although we find no previous studies of the Nordic Council prize shows, several elements of the role of an award show have been studied in another regional televised prize competition, namely the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). Although Eurovision is different in many respects, as a live broadcast music competition, it shares some similarities with the Nordic Council prize gala: it is organized by a pan-European organization, the EBU; it includes nominations from all member countries; and it is an annual, live-televised event broadcasted in all participating countries.

Previous studies of Eurovision have pointed to its role in constructing European identity (Coupe & Chaban, 2020; Press-Barnathan & Lutz, 2020) and promoting certain values as European (Baker, 2017). Importantly, studies of Eurovision point to the tension between the desire to, on the one hand, create a unified Europe through Eurovision, and on the other hand, political bloc-voting and "persistent rifts" in the European unity of Eurovision (Yair, 2019). While being an ongoing project of constructing European identity and belonging, often in contested ways, the contest is also a site of nation-building and nation-branding. The nation-branding is perhaps most available for the host country, allowing it "to promote or even change its image" when presenting the event (Jordan, 2014, p. 62), but each song and its performers also presents an opportunity to represent the participating nations.

As argued by Sandvoss (2008) in an analysis of the Eurovision Song Contest, the broadcast of this competition contributes to the creation of European identity through an "affective bond" with television audiences. A similar connection is observed in the connection between Swedish audiences and the Nobel Prize banquet, a televised event that is replicated and celebrated by all, from families and friend groups to preschools, student clubs, and other organizations (Hugoson, 2012). With the viewer popularity and media attention given to such events as the Eurovision, the Nobel Prize, and the Oscars, it is perhaps not surprising that the Nordic Council sought to televise its prize ceremony to be able to reach a larger audience. In the Nordic Council committee report on the proposal to introduce a prize in children and youth literature, the committee writes:

> The committee would like to add that in the future, there should be more targeted efforts towards visibility and publicity of prizes in the Nordic Council in general. Thus, there should be efforts to involve, for example, the public service stations in the nomination and announcement of the prizes. A TV broadcast covering the Nordic Council's award ceremonies could generate greater publicity

> for the prizes and reach far among many viewers throughout the Nordic region, which would make the Nordic Council's prizes more visible and more publicly recognized.
>
> (Nordisk Råd: Temasession i Reykjavik og 64. session i Helsingfors 2012, 2012, p. 624)

The explicit purpose of creating a televised prize ceremony, 50 years after the introduction of the first prize in literature, was thus to garner more public attention for the prizes, hoping to increase recognition of the Nordic Council Prizes and its winners, and, by extension, contribute to Nordic identity-building.

3 | MATERIAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The material for this article includes all televised Nordic Council Prizes galas from 2013 to 2023. The material has been accessed through The Swedish Media Database (SMDB) digital archive of television broadcasts (2013–2022) and YouTube (2023). While we have not compared the broadcasts across the Nordic public service broadcasters, the intention of the gala is to be sent across the Nordic countries as one program. The shortest program was 45 min long, and the longest one was 1 h and 30 min.

To describe the material and the broadcasting in more detail, we contacted the Nordic public service broadcasters to get more information about their broadcasts. We received responses from the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), the Swedish public service television company Sveriges Television (SVT), and the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE). We did not receive any response from the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RÚV).

Table 1 has been created from the Nordic public service broadcasters' responses and archived TV schedules. The NRK and SVT are the ones that most consistently broadcast the gala. DR did not send the gala from Finland in 2017 and 2022, and Yle did not send the gala from Denmark in 2016 and Norway in 2018. Only NRK, which hosted the gala in 2023, broadcasted it.

When asked how they decided whether or not to broadcast the gala, the responses included financial constraints and not having enough viewers of previous programs. When they are hosting the gala, all broadcasting companies broadcast the gala as a live event. Yle also reports that "it has also been relevant to broadcast all the years when Finns were among the nominees," notably highlighting the national dimension of interest in the prizes.

TABLE 1 Broadcasting of the Nordic Council Prize Gala by Nordic Public Service Broadcasters (2013–2023).

Year	DR (Denmark)	NRK (Norway)	SVT (Sweden)	Yle (Finland)
2013	✓	✓	✓	✓
2014	✓	✓	✓	✓
2015	✓	✓	✓	✓
2016	✓	✓	✓	–
2017	–	✓	✓	✓
2018	✓	✓	✓	-
2019	✓	✓	✓	✓
2020	✓	✓	✓	✓
2021	✓	✓	✓	✓
2022	–	✓	✓	✓
2023	–	✓	–	–

Note: ✓ = Broadcasted. – = Did not broadcast.

The gala was also streamed on YouTube by the Nordic Council in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, and in 2023, several broadcasters opted out of broadcasting the event.

We have received estimates of the number of viewers of the gala. We have also received information about the number of streams of the gala from NRK and SVT. The number of streams is reported as very low. We have received the number of the audience size for the regular broadcast from all the broadcasters. The number of viewers is the highest for the years when the gala is hosted by the broadcasting company. One reason for these numbers is due to the gala being broadcast on the main channel (e.g., SVT 1 rather than SVT 2, NRK 1 rather than NRK 2, etc.) when the gala has taken place in the same country as the broadcasting company. NRK has had the highest number of viewers, about 250,000–330,000 for these events. SVT has reached about 100,000 viewers and DR 65,000. We have not received the same detailed numbers from Yle. For the other broadcasts, the number of viewers for SVT varies from about 20,000 to 60,000, for NRK 6000 and 30,000, and DR 4000 to 35,000.

While the number of viewers is considered small by the Nordic public service broadcasters, our focus is not on the impact of the prize on its audience but on how the gala is organized to convey a message of Nordic cooperation. This reflects the ambitions of a regional political organization to use culture to promote its political objective.

3.1 | Analytical framework

To analyze the representation of the Nordic through prize ceremonies in the televised prize galas, we draw on Charles Sanders Peirce's (1944/1955) semiotics as a general approach for doing a multimodal empirical analysis. Peirce's semiotics are built upon the triad of sign, object, and interpretant, and their relationship helps us understand the meaning conveyed in the studied events.

> A sign, or *representamen*, is something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.
>
> (Peirce, 1940/1955, p. 99, italics in original)

The sign is a signifier that stands for something else; the object is what is referred to, which can either be represented within the sign or relate to an actual object in the world. The interpretant is the translation or development of the sign, providing the understanding or meaning derived by the one interpreting, thereby creating a new sign. While the semiotic elements form a triad, we are particularly focused on the relationship between the sign and the object. There are three types of relationships between a sign and its object: icon, index, and symbol (Peirce, 1940/1955, pp. 102–103).

An *icon* has a direct relationship with what it represents by imitating or resembling it. For example, we look for signs that visually resemble or imitate aspects of Nordic culture, such as landscapes. An *index* is a suggestion of something else, a sign indicating an object; a classic example is a paw print that signifies an animal. For instance, we look for more subtle indications of the Nordic in galas, such as the presence of politicians, indicating the event being organized after a political meeting and with Nordic politics and politicians in mind. A *symbol* is a sign arbitrarily associated with its meaning by convention. For example, we look for the presence and absence of linguistic and visual symbols, such as flags and logos, and their relationship to the Nordic. It is important to note that both the semiotic elements and the relationships between signs and objects often appear together.

With these semiotic insights as an overarching analytical lens, we created an observation protocol, positioning ourselves as interpreters deriving meaning from the triad of signs, objects, and interpretants by focusing on the

representation of "Nordic" and "Nordicness" during these galas. The protocol includes descriptions of relevant events and the elements, relations, and meaning involved in various events. We analyzed the galas through a multimodal lens, incorporating both audio and visuals in our analysis.

We examined visual elements such as clothing, architecture, still and moving images, and camera work to see how they represent "the Nordic." Audio aspects like the use of different Nordic languages, speeches, music, and even silence were analyzed to understand the messages conveyed. We also paid attention to what was said in speeches. We also considered other modes, such as spatial arrangements, to grasp the meaning of the "Nordic" conveyed through these galas. To facilitate a more detailed analysis of the unfolding events and how triads of signs, objects, and our interpretations of them may be linked, we included timestamps in our protocol. Based on our observations recorded in the protocol, we identified three central themes in the galas, which we will present below.

3.2 | Structure of the analysis

In order to answer the question of how the idea of the Nordic is expressed in the Nordic Council prize galas, the analysis below is organized in three parts, each focusing on a specific aspect of the award shows' content.

First, we analyze the contextual and structural elements that position this award ceremony in the easily recognizable form of a TV gala. Here, we observe how the Nordic award show is trying to find its form and how structural elements become established over time, how celebrities and politicians on stage are used to elevate the status of the awards, and how the tension between the national and the "Nordic" first comes to light.

Second, we focus on the narrative aspects of how ideas of a Nordic imagined community are conveyed in the award ceremonies. Here, we find an emphasis on the Nordic countries as a family or siblings, with several references to a shared cultural and historical past. We also identify a recurring narrative of Nordic political cooperation as uniquely strong. The political dimension of this gala—as the prizes are awarded by a political organization—also, at times, becomes a target for criticism in winner's acceptance speeches, thereby highlighting the conflation of culture and politics inherent in these prizes. This section also discusses the tension between "the national" and "the Nordic," not least as it is expressed through the different languages spoken on stage and the use of jokes in "keeping score" of which nation wins prizes.

The third and final section of the analysis deals with visuals that contribute to the making of a Nordic "we" in these galas. Here, we observe how landscape images, northern Lights, and the specific Nordic blue color are used to create visual unity throughout the galas and evoke cultural unity among the Nordic countries. We also find that the explicit use of national flags is avoided, while the colors of national flags are used to represent the different Nordic countries.

4 | MAKING THE NORDIC BY CONTEXTUALIZATION IN THE GALA

Following the above discussion on awards such as the Oscars, the Nobel Prize, and the Eurovision Song Contest, we identify several symbols that place the broadcasting of a prize ceremony in the context of a prestigious award ceremony and make it immediately recognizable to a viewing audience through its "performed eventfulness" (Pavlounis, 2018). These elements include nominees from different countries, celebrities, and festive clothing, the recruitment of famous people to host the show, previous winners presenting nominees, and acceptance speeches by the winners. Short videos introducing each of the nominees, sometimes with country-identifying segments, can also be part of this symbolization that contextualizes the event. All these characteristics thus serve to create a recognizable event of exclusivity and prestige for the prize, while the gala in itself provides an arena where shared ideas (about quality, belonging, and identity) can be communicated.

In the case of cultural prizes awarded by political organizations, where the awarding actor strives to achieve a political impact of some sort (cf. Foret & Calligaro, 2019), the context and structure of the award ceremony provide a medium through which a political purpose can be communicated. In the following analysis, we, therefore, analyze how the Nordic Council's prize ceremony broadcast makes use of such signs—for example, who participates, what structure the ceremony follows—that contextualize an event as an "award ceremony-gala." We also ask how the Nordic Council politics and the idea of a Nordic (imagined) community are communicated through this contextual structure.

4.1 | Becoming a TV gala in a Nordic context

Analyzing the annual television broadcasts of the Nordic Council Prizes between 2013 and 2023, we can conclude that they generally follow a fixed pattern, closely resembling the typical features of an award show. With few exceptions, the broadcast takes place on a stage in a building iconically and symbolically recognizable as a high-cultural venue in a Nordic capital, such as the concert hall in Oslo, Reykjavik, Copenhagen, and Helsinki, or the Blue Hall in the City Hall of Stockholm (where the Nobel Banquet also takes place). Elements that reoccur to create the structure of the show include having a celebrity/celebrities hosting the show, often national celebrities of the host country but sometimes with a Nordic connection, such as actors that have worked in several of the Nordic countries, for example, Sofia Helin and Hans Olav Brenner; having music and/or dance numbers in-between the announcement of each prize; having previous (often last year's) winners presenting each of the prizes; having short visual (images or video) presentations of each of the nominees; visually panning over the audience and the winner as they walk up on stage; and finally, acceptance speeches by the winners. This structure of the event serves as a shorthand to the established gala format, while the content and those attending serve to establish its Nordicness.

Across the 11 years of broadcasts studied, there are some notable differences in the structure and setting of the show. As the ceremony moves between the five main capitals of the members of the Nordic Council, the "production value" also shifts—the quality of the production appears higher in Oslo, Copenhagen, and Reykjavik, with larger stages, more elaborate musical numbers, more specialized stage decor, compared to the productions in Stockholm and Helsinki. Early on, the format has yet to be established, as the 2014 broadcast from Sweden is set mainly in a television studio of the long-running literary show "Babel," only showing short clips from the actual ceremony and with interview-style presentations of the winners. The 2014 show thus stands out in terms of format from the rest. The 2020 show also takes place in a studio due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it still closely follows the structure in terms of how nominees are presented with intermissions and acceptance speeches by winners (taking place through video link).

The establishment of the prize ceremony in the easily recognizable form of an award show serves both to create predictability and recognition, and to "borrow" some of the popularity and status of prizes such as the Oscars and the Nobel. The structured schedule of the annual show makes it predictable who will host it, and the fact that it is usually broadcast in the Nordic countries makes the gala a joint Nordic collaboration. This ambition is somewhat thwarted by the variation in production value between host countries, and, judging by the viewership, that the prizes have not been established as well known among the Nordic audiences.

The order of the five prizes during the ceremony varies slightly across the years, but the prize in literature is always awarded last, as the grand finale. The prestige of the literature prize is usually also explicitly mentioned, as it is always mentioned that this is the "first" or the "oldest" of the Nordic Council prizes. This is also reflected in the literature award winners, who usually give a bit more elaborate and prepared speeches than most of the winners in other categories. This status of the prize in literature and the references back to its history also serve to symbolically connect the prize itself to the history and development of Nordic cooperation since the founding of the Nordic Council in 1952. Thus, although the winners are awarded the same prize sum, the prize in literature holds a certain status that creates an internal tension among the prizes.

4.2 | Becoming a TV gala through politicians and celebrities

Since its first iteration in 1962, the Nordic Council Prize ceremony has taken place during the annual meeting of the Nordic Council as a festive end to the regular proceedings. In the early decades (1960–1980s), the prize ceremony consisted of rather lengthy speeches by the Nordic Council's president, the chair of the prize committee, and the winners of the prizes in literature and music. As more prizes were added, the speeches became shorter, and the ceremony gradually started to resemble its current form. The audience thus consisted mainly of the Nordic Council members of parliament and other politicians (see Authors, forthcoming). Since 2013, even though the ceremony is now broadcasted to a wider public audience, the prize is still awarded in connection to the Nordic Council's meetings, and the audience in the auditorium still consists of many politicians. This political dimension of the prize ceremony is often visually represented through camera views of the first rows of the audience, filled with ministers and other political figures.

Through the television broadcast, the Nordic Council has the opportunity to address a much wider audience than those physically present at the ceremony. It is therefore notable that the established format since 1962, where the Nordic Council president gives the introductory speech, is not consistently followed. Instead, the Nordic Council president only delivers an opening speech as part of the broadcast a few times between 2013 and 2019 (in 2015 and 2016). From 2020 onwards, there has been no speech by the Nordic Council chairperson during the televised awards show.

This development can be interpreted in various ways, but it is somewhat logical given the evolution of the prize ceremony into the format of a televised award show. The absence of Nordic Council presidents' speeches downplays the explicit political dimension of the prize and contributes to its metamorphosis into a more gala-like event, as lengthy political speeches do not fit the festive format of the show. This development breaks with the previously established format of the prize ceremony and lets non-political actors communicate the purpose of the prize to the viewing audience. However, the consistent presence of politicians in the audience serves as an index, indicating to the viewer the existence of the Nordic Council and previous political deliberations.

For the televised prize gala, the decision of who appears on stage to present the show and introduce nominees and winners is an opportunity to situate the prizes in a Nordic context, signaling both their political purpose of creating an integrated Nordic region and establishing the awards ceremony as a prestigious Nordic cultural event. For this purpose, cultural personas host the galas and previous winners are often enlisted to announce the winners of each category. This practice of reintegrating previous winners of the Nordic Council Prizes establishes a connection to the history of the prizes and integrates the winners into what the Nordic represents. However, in contrast to pre-2013 iterations of the prize ceremony, where someone from the jury committee presented the winners in rather lengthy speeches, the jury committee is notably absent from the televised version of the awards. How the winner is selected is never explained during the televised shows, which somewhat counteracts a connection to the history of the prizes.

After 2017, previous winners (or nominees) appear less regularly as prize announcers, and the focus shifts to celebrities or more publicly recognized figures as prize announcers, possibly in an effort to heighten the "star quality" of the ceremony. Between 2018 and 2023, high-level politicians (presidents, prime ministers, ministers of culture) and royalty show up to present the awards, as do some actors, musicians, and cultural personalities from the respective host countries. In announcing the winners, there is thus a slight tension between the Nordic and the national, as, although some presenters and hosts are well known outside their respective countries (for example, several of the actors who have a Nordic-international career such as Marie Bonnevie, Jakob Oftebro, and Sofia Helin) and speak several Nordic languages, many of them may be well known in the host country but are less known to a Nordic audience.

4.3 | Symbolic clothing

To further symbolize the event as a special occasion, a gala event, the hosts, the nominated persons, and sometimes the rest of the audience are dressed accordingly, for example, in a gown or smoking. Yet, many of the politicians, who have been in political meetings during the preceding days, wear business-formal attire: men typically wear suits, while women wear formal dresses. Highlighting national heritage and, in particular, representing the indigenous minorities of the Nordics, traditional clothing is sometimes worn by the audience, performers, or nominated artists. For example, the Environmental Achievement Award 2018 winner from Greenland, dressed in a white anorak when receiving the prize, and several samí presenters, nominees, and audience members wear traditional clothing. The most striking feature of the clothes worn is that they often are festive clothes. The exceptions, as mentioned, are the politicians. Taken together, the gala clothes, together with the traditional clothes, frame the event as standing out as something to make an effort for when attending and marking it as a special and noteworthy event where Nordic culture and prize winners are to be celebrated.

5 | MAKING THE NORDIC NARRATIVELY IN THE GALA

To narratively construct the "imagined community" of the Nordic region during the prize ceremonies, there are several topics that recur in speeches by hosts, prize announcers, and winners, all of which directly contribute to the construction of a shared Nordic community. Although these speeches are not primarily held by political actors such as the Nordic Council president, they all contribute to the overall political project of the Nordic Council Prizes, which is to bring Nordic countries together. In the 2017 host's welcoming speech, the Nordic region is described as: "long bright summer nights, dark winter months, untouched nature, lakes and roaring seas. However, the North is also a dynamic region at the forefront of the information society, with names that the whole world knows. Deep roots and common history, cultural traditions." This statement neatly captures the three main dimensions of Nordic identity that are most often repeated, namely: the love of nature, the shared history and culture, and being an open, outward-looking region in the world. Additionally, the idea of "Norden" as a family and references to the political project of the Nordic Council are also reoccurring themes. Below we elaborate on how these ideas contribute to the narrative construction of a Nordic imagined community in the prize ceremonies.

5.1 | Narratives of Nordic family, history, and identity in the gala

The relationship between the Nordic countries and their peoples is often referred to as one of family. An acceptance speech in 2020 mentions Nordic "sibling love", and the hosts in 2015 mention that "we are part of the same gallows humor, ironic, Nordic Noir family." In 2023, presenting the film prize, Maria Bonnevie talks about feeling at home when working in the Nordic countries, being on a film set with her Nordic "siblings." In 2021, the host talks about the Nordic community feeling "as if we are a family" and how he was born in one country, lives in another, and works in a third of the Nordic countries. This recurring family/sibling simile is interesting because it invokes a specific type of relationship: on the one hand, it is a very close relation, a deep bond of connection, that the individual parts have not really chosen for themselves but rather been born into. On the other hand, being siblings allows for individual characteristics and differentiation, whereas other common connectivity similes could require more uniform parts (e.g., "being a team" or being "peas in a pod"). The family references thus work to bring the show's audiences together in different Nordic countries.

5.1.1 | History

A shared history is also often referenced in speeches as part of what makes Nordic identity. Interestingly, the "shared history" referred to is primarily the Viking era or the Edda and Icelandic sagas, about 1,000 years ago, or the shared history since the start of the Nordic Council cooperation in 1952. The years between 1,100 and 1800, where several Danish-Swedish wars were fought, and Norway and Finland were not independent countries, are, however, never mentioned explicitly in reference to a shared history. Arguably, the distant past of the Viking age, in itself a historical period of both myths and facts, is less sensitive to imagine than other parts of the past. On other occasions, it is emphasized that Nordic identity does not only stem from a shared history, but is the result of ongoing dynamic exchange between people across borders (2015, 2017). Two notable exceptions to only mentioning the "nice" parts of history are the acceptance speech for the film prize for a film about Danish colonial history in 2023, where the winners talk about how important it is to scrutinize the dark parts of history, and in 2014 when the Literature Prize winner talks about Finnish pre-WW2 history and the mistreatment of a Jewish athlete. None of these more critical references to the past, however, frame their arguments directly as shared Nordic histories. Thus overall, references to a shared historic past serve to symbolically connect the Nordic countries together and contribute to the making of an imagined Nordic community with deep historical roots.

5.1.2 | Shared cultural references

Throughout the studied period, speakers make reference to Nordic cooperation as something unique, arguing that the Nordics share a common history and values, and that there is mutual trust and culture between the Nordic countries. The role of culture is central to this reasoning, often in combination with the role of the Nordic Council Prizes in culture, which are said to bring the Nordic countries closer together (2014). The idea of a shared Nordic identity is communicated through the argument that culture, such as literature, film, and music, can help us experience the shared history and develop shared visions for the Nordic countries (2017). By being talked about as something that can bring people together and unite the Nordic countries, the cultural expressions awarded during the awards shows—literature, film, music—function as a representation of an overall cultural connection between Nordic peoples. In the 2020 broadcast from Iceland, manuscripts of the 1000-year world sagas are shown and talked about as national treasures that contain all of Norden's stories that "bind us all together." Other statements about Nordic culture include the idea that children's literature has a special standing in the Nordic countries, which "speaks to the respect for children that exists here" (2021); that Nordic cooperation on film projects is especially successful (2022, 2023); and that Nordic literature shares features such as simplicity, closeness to nature, and an awareness of their roots present in many Nordic authors works (2018).

Overall, references to shared literary figures are common, in particular authors such as Astrid Lindgren (2018, 2020, 2023), Gunilla Bergström (2020), Tove Jansson (2020), H.C. Andersen (2019), Halldór Laxness (2015, 2018), and Johan Ludvig Runeberg (2019). Music and film references such as Edvard Grieg, Abba, Björk, Ingmar Bergman, and Lars von Trier are also often mentioned. In this context, the references to specific creators are double-edged symbols, as these, while well known in all Nordic countries, can also be understood as symbols of their respective countries, again invoking the national–Nordic tension present in the structure of the prize ceremony itself.

5.1.3 | Nature

The idea that Nordic identity is closely connected to nature comes up in several speeches. We hear that Nordic people like to be outdoors in the forest and in the mountains (2023). That water (lakes, geysers, rivers, the

ocean) is part of Nordic life (2021), that Nordic identity has to do with the seasons, the light, the fresh air, that Nordic identity is having your feet on the ground, and that Nordic nature nourishes the imagination (2019). This is also connected to ideas of a particular care for nature, especially in relation to the environmental prize: that we have a strong coastal culture in the Nordic countries, but we need to be better at taking care of the seas (2018), or that we cannot afford to lose the Arctic ice (2018). Thus, nature is a core part of the Nordic imagination, and becomes political in the context of the gala as something that creates identity and belonging for the Nordic community.

5.1.4 | Situating the Nordic in the world

Although the prize galas are broadcasted to a Nordic audience and awards nominees from the Nordic region, there is a clear connection to the surrounding world that makes itself known in several ways in the shows' speeches. This ranges from the idea that it is a privilege to live in the Nordic countries and that Nordic values can be a role model, to ideas about the role of culture as an important export commodity for the Nordic countries: Nordic culture is seen as a great "export and ambassador" for the Nordic region, and it is known for its cultural production around the world (2015). There is also a clear emphasis on shared values and ideas: that the Nordic countries have "security, peace and freedom to express ourselves," as a privilege that can inspire other countries (2015); that the Nordic societal model of gender equality, sustainable development and democratic values can be exported (2014); that literature crosses boundaries; and that the nominees and winners of the literature prize, enable access to a shared experience, and show that Nordic culture stands strong (2023).

In 2021, the prize announcer of the film prize talks about how he is proud to belong to the Nordic film community and that Nordic film has made a large impression in the world of movies. There are also references to Nordic films being awarded internationally in the Oscars and in Cannes Film Festival (2022). In 2023, the host references the TV show Vikings, which he has starred in, as an example of Nordic culture leaving its mark in the world. In relation to the music prize, music is often referred to as crossing national boundaries, and musicians are presented as having reached international recognition (cf. Authors, forthcoming, on international recognition often being part of the prize motivation for the music prize). These are all examples of the idea that Nordic culture can "punch above its weight" in the world. This claim has also been made about the impact of Nordic foreign policy (see, e.g., Björkdahl, 2013; Jakobsen, 2007). These references to the Nordic region's place in the world thus function to strengthen the idea of a Nordic community both by juxtaposing it with the outside world, which highlights similarities within the Nordic region, and by invoking a sense of pride in the Nordic position in the world.

The question we ask here, how a Nordic imagined community is communicated through the award shows, is also sometimes asked in the context of the show itself: what is "Nordic identity" and can "the Nordic" really be defined? Several of the acceptance speeches in 2020 talk about Nordic values, the openness between the Nordic countries, and the value of freedom of expression that people in the Nordic region have, which should not be taken for granted and that comes with an obligation to speak up for those who cannot. In speeches, the openness between Nordic countries is attributed to the shared culture, and culture is seen as a way to bring people together and create understanding. This theme is sometimes subverted, as in the 2019 host speech about whether there is anything specifically "Nordic," as we are shaped by "melancholy and weather, midwinter blot and midnight sun, Snorre and Jante," but that the prize nominees are "breaking the boundaries and opening up the world and thank God for that. What we have in common with each other, we also have in common with everyone else." A similar notion is raised in an acceptance speech in 2014: that the attempts to find a Nordic "us" are positive, but also can be dangerous. We thus, on the one hand, get cultural references that bind the Nordic peoples together. Yet, on the other hand, there is an ambition to reach beyond the Nordic and not define a specific Nordic identity.

5.2 | The narratives of a Nordic regional political project and acceptance speeches

Although Nordic Council political representatives do not play a prominent role in these ceremonies, the vision of the Nordic Council to create an integrated Nordic region is represented. In 2023, this vision is explicitly mentioned. Other times, speeches convey that cultural support from Nordic institutions can help young creators build the "Nordic of tomorrow" ("morgondagens Norden"); that the prizes are an "investment in Nordic cultural producers" ("kulturutövare"); or that the Prizes are awarded to the "best of the Nordics" (2022), highlighting the connection of the political and cultural dimension of these prizes. This is particularly visible in the 2022 show, where the 60th anniversary of the Nordic Council Prize in Literature is mentioned as an example of successful cooperation. Further, the importance of the Öresund Bridge is mentioned as an example of how good "we in the Nordic countries" are at building relations and connections with each other—and without it we would not have the TV-series "Bron" (the Bridge), or the genre of "Nordic Noir," and "now the whole world knows what a dark place we live in" (2022) (see also Saunders, 2021, p. 72); concluding that Nordic literature is of such high quality that we should feel proud in relation to the rest of the world (2022). In 2022, the hosts' ending remarks that they hope "all the viewers out there in the Nordic region" have "become curious/intrigued about your Nordic neighbors," highlights the purpose of the prize gala in raising awareness about Nordic culture between the neighboring Nordic states.

The Nordic Council is usually mentioned in some way when the hosts talk about the vision that the Nordic region should "become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world." The friendly atmosphere in Nordic cooperation is often remarked upon, and Nordic cooperation should not be taken for granted but celebrated because "nowhere else in the world is there such warm and good cohesion as in our Nordic community" (2016) or when hosts joke about the Nordic Council being "the world's coziest council" (2019) or like "G8 with cinnamon buns" (2013). These kinds of jokes serve to establish Nordic cooperation as a regional political project unique in the world for how much the member states like one another. The Nordic countries are "small by themselves, but together, they are a force to be reckoned with" (2017).

An important part of the narrative structure of a prize gala event is the "acceptance speech." In receiving the award and accepting to become part of the awarding organizations' laureates, the winner also reinforces the ceremony's legitimacy by becoming part of the broader project of the Nordic Council (Authors, forthcoming). But, as we recognize from awards such as the Oscars, acceptance speeches can be an opportunity for a winner to raise important issues of political importance to the industry or to a general audience. In the Nordic Council prize context, this possibility is of particular weight, as the awarding organization is a political institution, and the prizes are part of a political project of creating Nordic integration. In general, however, most acceptance speeches during this period are not very political, as winners primarily focus on expressing gratitude for receiving the prize and to whom they were thankful.

Several of the acceptance speeches throughout the years include a thank you to the Nordic Council in their speech. Sometimes, they are more political in nature when the speaker voices an issue by speaking directly to the politicians: "We stand here in front of the political elite of the Nordic region," urging them to action. When this happens, the political project of Nordic cooperation becomes directly connected to the prizes, and importantly, the political nature of the award show becomes more pronounced when winners address the political representatives present in the room.

The most notable example of when acceptance speeches become an opportunity for criticism and contestation (Coupe & Chaban, 2020; Grous, 2021) is the award show in 2019. Here, Greta Thunberg and *Fridays for Future* are given the Environmental Prize, but Thunberg does not show up to the award ceremony and does not accept the prize, and her statement, given by two young women from *Fridays for Future*, announces that she declines to accept the prize as the Nordic governments are not doing nearly enough to combat climate change. The statement contains a sharp critique of the awarding institution and the politicians present in the prize venue. The narrative structure of how this non-acceptance speech is presented is also interesting—the camera

repeatedly cuts to the politicians on the first row of the audience, several of whom look irritated or angry, and most of whom do not applaud when the speakers walk off stage as is customary; there is clear tension in the room. Yet, the show goes on, and no further acknowledgment of this unique event where someone chooses not to accept the award is made. While refusals of awards are often hard to carry out and not be harmed symbolically by breaking with the conventions of accepting awards (English, 2005, p. 218), the act of not accepting transforms the power dynamics in its effort to show the hypocrisy of the award for the environment. Additionally, the winner of the Literature Prize in the same year, Danish author Jonas Eika, while accepting the prize, delivers a scathing critique of Danish politics toward immigrants in his speech. He calls out racism and nationalist policies in Denmark as well as other Nordic countries and aims this critique also toward the political audience present at the award ceremony. Thus, the 2019 broadcast really stands out in terms of the highly political nature of its (non-)acceptance speeches.

5.3 | The narratives of national competition and linguistic differences

In each of the Nordic Prize celebrations, five winners are announced. These winners are selected from nominations from all Nordic countries and the self-governing regions, which means that they will, indirectly, be "national" winners. That is, if, for example, a winning author is from Sweden, this might be interpreted as if "Sweden" won, even though the prizes are intended to award "Nordic achievements" (compared to, e.g., Eurovision or sports championships, where competitors are much more explicitly seen as representatives of their country). In addition to this risk of the prize ceremony becoming a national competition, the very idea of a competition in culture can be questioned, as ranking cultural achievements is inherently difficult. Thus, there are two dimensions of tension within the context of these awards shows: Can we compete in culture, and can we really have national winners in a prize intended to unite the Nordics?

In the award shows, these two questions are sometimes explicitly, but the questions are addressed humorously. In this context, the use of jokes can be understood as a way to deflate conflict and release tension; by addressing the questions and making jokes about them, the problem is acknowledged but also subverted. The 2014 gala, which to some extent is an outlier in terms of format, takes the idea of competing in culture quite far: Here, the host says that you cannot compete in culture but then jokingly presents a "scoreboard" of the number of prizes awarded to each country since the start, which rather explicitly challenges the idea that the prizes are awarded for a "Nordic" achievement. In the 2015 show, the hosts joke that it is important "not to win but to participate," and in 2018, a joke is made after the first prize is presented, "Congratulations Iceland 1-0", giving sports-like connotations of competition to the event. The winner of the music prize in 2019 addresses the problem of competition in culture in her acceptance speech with a somber tone. She recognizes the issues of competition from her experience of having a twin, emphasizing that things have intrinsic value.

Adding to the idea of the Nordic Council's prizes as a competition is the role of prize money. As the winners in each category receive quite a substantial sum, jokes about the fact that the prize money is given in Danish currency instead of Sweden's weaker currency reoccur (2013 and 2018). Further, winners sometimes address the impact the prize money can have for them, as it allows them to keep working within their field (2014), sometimes joking that much cultural work is unpaid "volunteer" work (2013). The film prize winner in 2020 talks about the importance of the prize (and money) to enable making niche films rather than blockbusters. This highlights that although it might be difficult to compete in culture, the prize money is substantial enough that winning this prize can make a difference for someone working in the cultural sector.

In addition to jokes about competing in culture and which country won, several jokes play on national differences and stereotypes about the different nationalities. For example, the hosts often joke about national stereotypes, such as the state of the Icelandic economy after the financial crisis (2015) or some characterization of each of the five countries (2018). One example of this is a comedy segment showing tourists in Oslo dressed up as

different Nordic political leaders in 2013. These jokes also have a function in constructing a Nordic community, as they serve both to lighten the mood a bit between the more solemn statements about Nordic unity and shared values and to acknowledge national differences between the Nordic countries in a way that does not create tension. However, as the "joke" is the only form in which national differences are addressed in this way, they also serve to illustrate the interesting tension between the Nordic and the national in these award shows.

Jokes about language and language differences are a very common element of the shows. These take primarily two forms: either hosts use several different languages to welcome the audience, not always making a joke, but usually in a light tone, or, in prize speeches (announcing or accepting a prize), the speakers sometimes joke about or make a comment about using their own language. The 2015 hosts joke about how hard it is to learn Danish, why Icelanders do it, about "Nordic muddle" as the language you end up speaking when you travel across borders, and about Finland being left out of this. Similar jokes about language differences or about "false friends," that is, words that mean different things in different languages, were made in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

There are some notable differences between the languages: Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish are often used by speakers, while speakers from Finland often choose to speak Swedish or English, and speakers from Iceland often speak Danish or Norwegian. This illustrates a hierarchy between the languages—some are "more Nordic" than others in the sense that they can be understood by more of the other language speakers. Thus, the use of jokes and the use of languages partly serve to create a Nordic community by joking about differences or preconceived ideas about one another, yet—jokes and language also serve to draw the line between in-group and out-group: one notable silence here is that the smallest members, the self-governing areas, are never the butt of such a joke. This might be intentional, as it might be easier to joke about the more well-known languages, but it also implicitly excludes them.

6 | MAKING THE NORDIC VISUALLY IN THE GALA

The third main dimension that contributes to the making of a Nordic imagined community in the award ceremony is the use of visuals. To convey the Nordic dimension during the ceremonies, the gala draws on multiple visual representations of Nordicness, which manifest in the material setting, connecting the events and its audience to a shared Nordic identity. By making this connection, the award goes beyond the regular narrative and structure of an award ceremony. Rather, the gala becomes a distinct event embedded in a specific geographical area and political context. The material arrangements on stage and through pre-recorded video clips refer to the possibilities of sharing a Nordic identity in various ways. Here, we analyze how the event organization employs still and moving images of the Nordic landscape and its people, and use color and lighting with a recurring spectrum of similar blue "Nordic" colors, to convey an overall visually coherent representation of 'Nordicness' in the broadcasts of the prize ceremony.

6.1 | The introductory imagery of the gala

To set the stage and mood for the event, each show starts off with imagery of Nordic landscapes, the venue (inside or outside), and its audience. This approach iconically and symbolically presents the larger picture by showing the venue and a large audience and videos from shared Nordic landscapes. The focus shifts between the interior and exterior over the years, with the exterior represented by the venue or Nordic landscapes. For example, some of the galas in the material are introduced with a drone perspective of Nordic landscapes and the event location. At the first gala in 2013, the viewer saw a drone flyover of Oslo's opera house at the harbor in dark winter attire. The next year, in Sweden, the opening featured a mountainous landscape under a strong northern light display in blue and green hues. The imagery of the northern lights appeared again the following year in Iceland. The introductory imagery changed over the next 4 years to a stationary camera showing the venue and audience

or Oslo's opera house in daylight, a view reused in subsequent Oslo events. The drone perspective returned during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic when many clips were recorded outside due to restrictions. After a picture of the rotating statuette in blue, the drone footage included Icelandic mountains with stylized flags overlaying various Icelandic environments (waterfalls, mountains, coastline, harbor), followed by the names of Nordic Council prizes in multiple languages; the segment ended with the logo and flags in a row, "Nordic Council Prizes" in Icelandic, lit like white northern lights against a blue background. A similar approach was taken the following year in Copenhagen, with drone shots of ice floes in the sea, lakes, and forests, a rushing brook with a small house on a summer island, the Öresund Bridge in evening light and mist, and finally, water in Copenhagen leading to Skuespilhuset, a modern glass building, with illuminated displays representing each prize, symbolized by items like books and instruments.

Hence, several icons, indexes, and symbols in the gala become visible in the opening scenes of the broadcast. Invoking a specific Nordic imaginary, these scenes feature landscapes filmed in the Nordic countries that emphasize silence, untouched nature, and especially the northern lights, rather than bustling downtown streets, skyscrapers, or people conversing. Nature, as an icon, directly shows natural milieus in Nordic countries, symbolizing the Nordic region as a place of wonder and shared natural exceptionalism. The iconic presentation of the venue, the building, and the audience situates the event in a Nordic capital city and introduces the high-status guests (e.g., ministers and royal family). This gives the event a flair of exclusivity and anticipation, heightened by the accompanying murmur sounds of the audience before the show is about to start. The from-above angles, often filmed with drone shots, also highlight that the event is part of something larger, presenting the significant institutions of Nordic culture, both as concrete cultural buildings and as the symbolic Nordic nature. The indices of the Nordic and the event are at play as the event's opening scenes build anticipation, indicating what is about to unfold.

6.2 | The Nordic without its countries

As the winners of the Nordic Council's prizes are selected from nominees from each member country (or language area), the awards hold an inherently national dimension. Yet, in contrast to for example an international sports competition, the winners do not represent their respective country. Instead, the Nordic Council's prizes awards "the best of the Nordics", and the winner is thus intended to be a representative of *Nordic*, rather than *national*, achievements. Thus, unlike a sports competition, explicitly national symbols such as national anthems and flags are, with few exceptions, not shown during these ceremonies. Since flags are a very direct way of representing each country, they are sometimes still visually indicated when introducing nominees.

In the first ever iteration of the gala in 2013, flags were avoided on stage and in the videos introducing each nominee. Instead, the nominees are introduced with colors in water—or smokelike formations resembling their flag's colors and almost their shape, along with the country's name, while avoiding explicit display of flags. A similar example is the show from 2015 in Iceland, where faint colors and the structure of the flag are intertwined with a silhouette of forest or mountains and northern lights when introducing nominees, or 2018 when the colors of flags are used, but not the flags themselves, in the introduction segment for nominees of each prize category. Similarly, in the broadcast from Iceland during the pandemic mentioned above, although the flags are indicated, they are stylized and lined up without any space between, creating a continuum of flags that, rather than separating the Nordic countries, instead symbolically brings them together (see Figure 1):

There are some exceptions to the avoidance of flags. One is the mentioned comedic segment of the first broadcast in 2013, where tourists in Oslo are asked to make parodies of speeches from Nordic leaders by dressing

FIGURE 1 Flags from the Nordic Council's prize ceremony 2020 in Iceland. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

up as them and being unable to speak the language. When introducing this segment, the flags of the Nordic countries are presented. This segment can be understood partly as before the format of the show has been established, as politicians are not joked about in a similar manner in any subsequent galas, nor are flags clearly visible.

From the perspective of making Nordic community, the most striking exception to the use of flags occurred at the award show in Finland in 2017. In its opening segment, footage shows the celebration of Finland's 100th anniversary of independence. Commencing with a serene nature scene featuring a lake, it follows with the raising of the Finnish flag, set against a forest backdrop with a group of people. The footage then transitions to a panoramic cityscape view, followed by a choir singing, adorned in Finland's flag colors. Scenes of forests, harbors, cultural events, and sports ensue, with numerous Finnish flags visible throughout the footage. This is the only time in any of the broadcasts that only one specific country is highlighted and its flag shown numerous times. Finland thus takes the opportunity as a host country "to promote … its image" (Jordan, 2014, p. 62). This demonstration of Finnish independence and identity seems, in the context of the Nordic Council's prizes, to clash with the overarching ambition to create unity across the Nordic countries, highlighting the inherent "Olympic internationalism" of a prize that celebrates Nordic achievements by selecting winners from a group of national nominations.

6.3 | The Nordic Council Logo and the "Nordic Blue" Color

In lieu of national flags, the Nordic Council's logotype stands out as the most used symbol. The logo, a stylized white swan on a blue background, is used at various places throughout the award ceremonies. Sometimes, it is visible at the start and end of the broadcast, especially in 2020 and 2023, when the gala was arranged and broadcast by the Nordic Council on YouTube. The logo also appears on speaker cards, on the podium, as pins, on envelopes with paper telling who won the award, and similar to a water stamp during the cutscenes with nominees. The Nordic Council's design manual states that the Nordic Council logotype, The Nordic Swan, can be used to represent the Nordics without a flag.

> The Swan represents trust, integrity and freedom. It has served as a symbol of Nordic co-operation for over three decades. The new Swan is a simple, strong and open image of a swan in flight.
>
> Open-ness to new thoughts, ideas and partnerships is one of the fundamental principles of Nordic co-operation.
>
> (Design manual—Nordic Council of Ministers and Nordic Council, n.d.)

Most often, the classical blue logo on a white background is shown, but iterations with pink or black logos also appear. Although using green would indicate a more recognizable logo in the Nordic countries, as the Nordic Swan in green (reversed and with some additional modifications) has been used as a sustainability ecolabel for products from the Nordic countries and was introduced by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1989.

In addition to the Nordic Council's logotype, there is also a specific blue color associated with Nordic cooperation. This blue color "signifies formal Nordic co-operation, and so is white on a primary blue background." (Design manual—Nordic Council of Ministers and Nordic Council, n.d.). See Figure 2.

This blue color is found in the Nordic Council logo and with the typesetting Mark Pro, which is the primary typeface. In this respect, the gala is framed by colors and text types that already exist in other channels of communication to convey the message of Nordic cooperation and the Nordic council, for example, webpages, leaflets, newsletters, and so on. Moreover, additional colors are used, and they are also used to convey Nordic cooperation as they are taken from the eight Nordic flags, namely "dark blue, blue, red, and yellow." (Design manual—Nordic Council of Ministers and Nordic Council, n.d.).

FIGURE 2 The Nordic Council's primary blue color of Nordic cooperation. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

On stage, the blue color is often used as a way to light the stage background, and the additional colors are also sometimes used to light the stage. Using a single color of blue instead of flags and text is thus used to convey the Nordic context of the event. An example is from the 2022 Helsinki ceremony; in this event, lighting consists of soft blue spotlights shining up from the floor, with a large Nordic Council logo on a reasonably small screen in the background. Taken together, the use of the Nordic Council's logotype and the consistent use of the specific "Nordic blue" color, creates a visual unity that serves to bind the ceremonies together from year to year, as well as connect them visually to the Nordic Council's political cooperation.

6.4 | Northern lights as visual representations of nordicness

Several elements of Nordic nature and landscapes have already been mentioned: mountain tops, foreshores, and ice floes. The most notable and distinguishable natural element is the northern lights. Although not exclusive to the Nordic region (they can also be seen in, e.g., Russia and Canada), the northern lights (aurora borealis) are emblematic of the Nordic and are used in several ways in the award ceremonies. In the first few iterations of the show, the northern lights are used in the opening sequences to place the gala in a Nordic context. In 2015, the theme of the entire ceremony is centered around the northern lights. Stage lighting is used to mimic the colors and movement of the northern lights; an art music project is presented that aimed to emulate the sound of them; the nominees are presented against a backdrop of forests and mountains accompanied by the northern lights; the host even attempts to dance like the northern lights; and finally, an original piece of music is performed with the northern lights in the background.

The first exception to introducing northern lights as part of the gala happened in Copenhagen in 2016, where it is also uncommon to see northern lights (in contrast to Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland), and the theme became more uncommon after this. Although not as visually present on stage after 2016, the prize statuette "Nordlys" (Norwegian Bokmål for "northern lights") is given to the winners of each prize. The statuette is a glass sculpture that symbolically and iconically represents the northern lights. It consists of several slender glass plates, the upper parts of which are cut so that the angle of the glass falls in the same direction but at different heights, thus visually reminding us of the northern lights. Overall, the northern lights stand out as an important symbol of the Nordic in these prize ceremonies.

7 | CONCLUSION

We have shown how the idea of the Nordic is expressed as part of a prize-giving culture in the broadcasted Nordic Council prize ceremonies from 2013 to 2023. We have explored how organizers use narratives, audio, textual

elements, and visuals in the award ceremonies to convey the meaning of the prizes through an arrangement that merges culture, politics, and media. More specifically, we showed how the use of Nordic symbols such as shared cultural references, the Nordic blue color, icons like Nordic landscapes and Northern Lights, and indices such as politicians indicating the previous political gathering and their role in the Nordic Council serve to construct a narratively cohesive Nordic gala. This, in turn, connects the awarding of prizes to the political project of Nordic integration.

The recurring references to shared Nordic values, history, and culture construct the Nordic region as a community with a 1000-year shared history, democratic values, and world-renowned artists. "Nordicness" is having these values, an attachment to nature, and an appreciation for the "noir" side of life. In this narrative, national competition between the countries of the Nordic region is playful; differences are reduced to jokes about cultural stereotypes that all can laugh at. Overt national symbols such as flags are largely avoided, and songs and performances are made to include all of the Nordic. Commonality is also constructed by juxtaposing the Nordic region with the rest of the world, emphasizing "Nordic" values and elevating cultural achievements as good representations of the Nordic community.

Thus, the ceremony is not only about celebrating, recognizing, and consecrating culture, but also about linking the prizes to the broader regional political project—the promotion of a Nordic "imagined community" that must be integrated without competing with national "imagined communities." The TV gala must navigate the paradox of being both a competition between Nordic countries and a symbol of Nordic cooperation.

This dimension of regional "imagined communities" is closely tied to the concept of geopolitical culture, which pertains to a state's sense of identity, place, and mission in the world (Toal, 2017; see also Saunders, 2021). By transforming the Nordic Council prize ceremony into a televised show, the Nordic Council has sought to reach a larger pan-Nordic audience directly. Through the adoption of established televised gala formats, recognizable from events like the Oscars and Nobel Prize ceremonies, the Nordic Council Prize ceremony evokes the glamour and prestige associated with such prizes. The televised Nordic Council prize ceremony thereby serves as a vehicle for advancing the Nordic Council's political project of establishing the Nordic region as an integrated community.

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